

Opening speech, Play the Game 2015

Reform or revolution? In any case the silence must be broken

The best protection any whistleblower can get, is that they live and work in an environment where conflicting interests are accepted as a fact of life.

By Jens Sejer Andersen, international director, Play the Game

Dear Minister

Dear President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

Lord Mayor of Aarhus

Members of parliament and city council

Distinguished guests from near and afar

Colleagues and friends

Ladies and gentlemen

An opening address? Are you sure this is a good idea? Opening a conference can be a very risky enterprise in sport.

For instance, when almost 100 sports federations and many other international stakeholders gathered in Sochi half a year ago to celebrate the annual convention of their common organisation SportAccord, the opening address got dramatic consequences.

The President of SportAccord, Marius Vizer, used the occasion to do what a majority of his member federations had elected him to do two years earlier. He rendered opposition to the International Olympic Committee whose President Thomas Bach was sitting in the first row.

The result was astonishing. Within a few hours his own members started to sign letters distancing themselves from Vizer, and before the SportAccord convention was over, the majority of his members had run screamingly away. Not from Sochi, but from their president.

Within weeks, also host cities and event organisers started to cut their cooperation with SportAccord. And one month after his controversial opening speech Marius Vizer had to resign, and nobody has heard much of neither Vizer nor SportAccord ever since.

So which terrible accusations did Marius Vizer launch that could make his powerful organisation all but disappear in an unprecedented chain of events?

Did he accuse any one of rape and plunder, or being cruel to children and animals?

No, Vizer raised purely sports political question.

He complained that he could not get in touch with the IOC president. He criticised the reform package that the International Olympic Committee unanimously adopted last December – the so-called Agenda 2020.

The Agenda 2020 hardly brings any real benefit to sport, to the international federations, or the athletes, Vizer said.

He said the IOC system is expired, outdated, wrong, unfair and not at all transparent.

He called for more influence to the sports organisation within the IOC.

He suggested that also Ministries of Sport should be involved in decision processes on major events.

He called for term limits for elected sports presidents and other leading officials.

He said that the highest court in sport, the Court of Arbitration in Sport, should be independent.

Marius Vizer asked: How much should we continue to invest in buildings and infrastructure and how much in people. Quote:

“Why invest hundreds of millions of dollars in Opening and Closing Ceremonies, while millions of athletes live in hunger and they don’t stand a chance in sport due to the lack of proper conditions?” Unquote.

Today, the money invested in sport never reaches the athletes and their families, the SportAccord President claimed. Quote:

“If indeed the “IOC distributes 3.25 million dollars a day, every day of the year, for the development of sport worldwide”, why do millions of athletes suffer and cannot enjoy or reach performances in sport?”

These questions were dangerous enough to end the influence of Marius Vizer in international sport – although he still is the president judo. And this were the unanswered questions that all but liquidated SportAccord.

The ruins of the organisation have been taken over by people loyal to the IOC without any intentions of rebuilding them. Nobody has made a closure speech.

And what happened to the questions? As so often in sport, they are left unanswered. I am certainly not going to repeat them, and remember: This is not an opening address.

Let me instead try opening a conversation. I will call Yuliya and Vitaliy Stepanov who appeared in a documentary on doping in athletics made by German TV station ARD last December. We had announced we would welcome the Stepanov couple here today, but unfortunately, they had to cancel:

[here is an interlude with a conversation over Skype with the Stepanov couple who has to live outside their home country since their participation in the ARD programme]

As you can hear, blowing the whistle on cheating and corruption in sports comes at a price. This evening you will meet the journalist who produced the documentary, Hajo Seppelt.

But there are people who are far worse off after denouncing wrongdoing than the Stepanov couple. After all, they have made their own decisions about where to stay.

The journalist Khadija Ismayilova from Radio Free Europe in Azerbaijan is not as fortunate. In September she was convicted to seven and a half years in prison, charged with embezzlement. Her arrest has been criticised worldwide by human rights and intergovernmental organisations who suspect that putting Khadija Ismayilova in jail is simply due to the fact that she has gathered too much evidence on the ruling Aliyev family's private business affairs, including the presidential family's earnings related to the European Games in Baku in June this year.

A human rights lawyer, Rasul Jafarov, who led a campaign called "Sport for Rights" intending to draw attention to Azerbaijan's human rights problems in the lead-up to the European Games, did not get a ticket for the competitions. He was jailed on May 16 for six and a half years for illegal entrepreneurship, tax evasion and abuse of office.

Tomorrow you will meet allies of Ismayilova and Jafarov, and you will also meet a courageous young man, Rasim Adjalov, who left his high position in the organisation of the European Games when 16 people were killed in a fire in some plastic panels that were set up to decorate the neighbourhood to make it look better during the games.

On Tuesday, it will be of great interest to hear the corporate director of the European Games, Mr. Elchin Safarov, explain the legacy of the games in Azerbaijan. We appreciate highly that the Azeri authorities have accepted to engage in an open debate.

Far away from these events, and forgotten by most of the sports public, another unfortunate whistleblower is trying to overcome financial and psychological ruin in Buenos Aires where he lives at a minimum pension.

Mario Goijman from Argentina is completely ignored by the international sports community, although he should be praised and awarded for revealing the massive personal profits – at least 33 million US-dollars – that the former international volleyball president Ruben Acosta took as a share of the revenues of his sport.

When the Goijman from Argentina protested, he was not only banned from all volleyball – he also lost the reimbursement of 800,000 US-dollars that the international volleyball federation FIVB owed him for organising the World Championships in 2002.

For the past six years, Play the Game has over and over again tried to convince international volleyball, the IOC, the Pan-American sports organisation, the Argentinian authorities and many others that a solution must be found to get Mario Goijman out of his miserable situation.

We cannot say we have succeeded. But we can say that we have given – and still give – the international sports community a chance to prove that they are serious when praising fair play, transparency and good governance.

Goijman is still waiting, and so are many others.

Over the 18 years that Play the Game has functioned as an asylum for different kinds of whistleblowers, a home for the homeless in sport, we have – with very few exceptions – received one predictable response from the Olympic family.

Silence.

Perhaps they believe that if they do not hear the whistleblowers, there is no whistleblowing. Perhaps they believe that if they keep silent, the problems will go away.

Or perhaps the international sports federations feel that they do not really have issues worth talking about.

If that is the case, we now have the evidence to prove them wrong. Later this afternoon and several times during the conference, you will get familiar with the results of our first Sports Governance Observer report.

The Sports Governance Observer is a measuring tool we developed a couple of years ago in cooperation with experts from six European universities. This year, Play the Game's own expert Arnout Geeraert from Leuven University spent most of his waking hours applying the tool on all 35 international Olympic federations – a huge and troublesome data collection exercise.

Among the most important findings in the new report are that the great majority of the sports federations have no term limits on elected officials, no public information on accounts and activities, no integrity checks of their leaders, offer no insight into salaries and perks and no effective internal control mechanisms such as independent ethics and audit committees.

That means that all these federations are easily exposed to corruption, mismanagement and other kinds of exploitation by people who use sport for their own personal good. It means that the whole Olympic family has a lot to talk about, and it will be very unwise to continue to ignore and expel those people who challenge the status quo.

Ladies and gentlemen, silence does not work: Today we see how FIFA, arguably the most powerful international sports federation, is crumbling under the weight of too many years of corrupt and criminal practices.

When journalists and whistleblowers started raising FIFA issues at the turn of this century, and when Swiss investigators made their first discoveries of systematic corruption, and when it was finally confirmed in court in 2008 – not only FIFA, but also the International Olympic Committee remained silent, although they knew better.

Only two weeks ago – after 15 years – did the IOC President publically recognise that something in FIFA was utterly wrong.

Will it take another 15 years before the documented mismanagement and corruption in other sports is recognised and dealt with by the Olympic family? We hope not.

If the sports movement does not react, the world outside – the governments, the sponsors, the fans, the athletes surely will. It already happens. Over the past five years, the sports debate has changed dramatically.

Issues that were taboo just ten years ago and only discussed in insignificant little gatherings like Play the Game: match-fixing, corruption in organisations, unsustainable mega-events, lack of attention to the everyday athlete and so forth – these issues are now mainstream.

If you doubt that, take a look at the draft UNESCO charter in your delegate pack which we shall discuss when we close the conference Wednesday.

We have strong hopes that this new charter will inspire governments all over the world to make national strategies for sport where all the challenges are addressed.

As you may have noticed, the title of this conference is “Global Sport: Reform or revolution?”

This is partly because we are sure that if fundamental reform does not happen, the sports movement that was built all the way through the 19th and 20th century, will become increasingly irrelevant.

In some way a peaceful revolution is already taking place. All over the world, people engage increasingly in physical activity without waiting for decisions from above.

New, innovative, communication-minded, and committed entrepreneurs emerge from all corners of society and offer new movement cultures, new events and new organisation forms in close contact with their customers – just like the sports federations did when they were founded in a distant past.

From the turmoil we see at the top of world football and to the new trends among the grass-roots something completely new seem to happen.

If we want the new reality in sport and physical activity to become better than the old one, we have to ensure that it is accompanied by an open, unrestricted dialogue that invites everybody and excludes no-one, and where all questions are welcomed, especially the difficult ones.

The best protection any whistleblower can get, is that they live and work in an environment where conflicting interests are accepted as a fact of life, and an open, unrestricted dialogue actively pursued, partly to negotiate the disagreements, and partly to reach the best possible understanding of the world we live in and the best foundation for the decisions we make.

Such environment is what we try provide at Play the Game – in our daily activities and every two years at conferences like this. To achieve this and develop a robust democratic culture, we depend on your assistance and we hope you are ready.

If not, I must remind you that science has just proven that you are at this moment engaging in the one of the most deadly activities for the human body: sitting on a chair. So in the coming days we urge you to raise your voice, stand up for your expertise and opinions and be ready to get moved by your fellow conference delegates.

Oh, did I make an opening address after all? Then, will you please check if we are still here in six months' time?

Thank you. It is now time to Play the Game.